

Quality Processes in Distance Education

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INTRODUCTION

Practitioners and providers in distance education owe a great debt to the founders of the UK Open University (UKOU). The history of distance education can be broken into two eras, each separated by the successful establishment of the UKOU. The UKOU had as strong an incentive as any institution to improve quality — its very survival is dependent on its success. Prior to the establishment of the UKOU, distance education (or correspondence education, or extramural studies or external studies, as it was then known) was characterized by high attrition and high failure rates (White, 1974). The UKOU planners recognized this fact. They realized that, for the University to succeed, the causes of the high attrition and high failure rates had to be addressed. The fact that the University continues to this day is testament to its success.

The way in which the UKOU tackled the issue of quality, carries some lessons for distance education providers today. It did so, not by targeting one key area, but by tackling the range of factors that affect the quality of a student's experience of studying at a distance: by investing heavily in the presentation quality of materials; by making innovative use of media, (particularly the broadcast media); by putting in place a new type of organisational structure to support teaching staff in the work of course design, teaching, and assessment; and by building up a range of other support functions: establishing local study centres, employing local tutors, and instituting a program of residential schools.

Over the past decade, the character of distance education has changed greatly. Print-based delivery has been replaced by online delivery, and technology has impacted virtually every aspect of course delivery. Yet the importance of certain principles remains. Quality needs to be conceived of, not just in terms of a single factor, but rather in terms of the wide range of factors that impact student learning.

Interest in quality, in relation to distance education, grew throughout the 1980s and 1990s. For example, in Australia the professional association for tertiary

distance educators took *Quality in Distance Education* as the theme for its national conference (Atkinson, McBeath and Meacham, 1981); a decade later, Nunan and Calvert (1992) produced a milestone report on quality and standards in distance education; and five years after that, the Higher Education Council of the National Board of Employment Education and Training commissioned a study of Quality in Resource-based learning (Higher Education Council, 1997). However, by the late 1990s the quality agenda in distance education had been overtaken by a broader agenda around quality in general education that led in many countries to the establishment of national quality agencies responsible for auditing institutional processes for quality management (Vidovich, 2002).

THE SHIFT TO ONLINE DISTANCE EDUCATION

Online learning is not always distance learning, although in saying this it depends on whether one interprets distance as distance in place or distance in either place or time. Online learning can encompass a wide range of delivery modes, differing both in terms of the learner's location as well as whether online learning is blended with face-to-face learning. Online distance education therefore refers to a subset of all online learning in which courses are delivered entirely or almost entirely online and there is a separation between the teacher and the student. Generally, this separation is conceived of in terms of place; however, given the fact that distance education is defined in terms of separation in either time or place, one could conceive of a form of online distance education that occurred on-campus,

Those who are new to the field of distance education often see the shift to online learning as raising a new set of quality concerns. At one level this is the case. The introduction of new media, the adoption of new modes of presentation and communication, and the implementation of learning management systems and learning content management systems present entirely

new challenges for those who are expected to teach online. The existence of these challenges undoubtedly presents a threat to quality. However, at a more fundamental level, the same principles of teaching and learning apply: good teaching involves providing students with opportunities for active learning while at the same time providing timely and appropriate feedback.

QUALITY PROCESSES

Quality is a concept. The practical manifestation of a commitment to quality is the implementation of one or more processes aimed at assuring or improving quality.

Attempts to measure quality have traditionally made via student opinion surveys. This approach assumes that students' opinions on the quality of the teaching they receive reflect the effectiveness with which they learn. However, many educators would challenge this assumption. In recent time increased importance has been placed on achievement measures. In a 2003/2004 survey of US college instructors and administrators, Kim & Bonk (2006) found that 44% predicted that in the coming decade the quality of online education will be most effectively evaluated by comparison of the achievement of online learners with the achievement of those in live or face-to-face classrooms and 14.8% said that it will be most effectively evaluated by student performance in simulated tasks of real-world activities.

However, neither the results of opinion surveys nor measures of student achievement have any impact on quality if the actions taken to assess the quality of distance education offerings are not followed up by actions to address any quality issues that the opinion or achievement data may have revealed.

It is now recognised that managing quality involves both measurement and corrective action and the types of quality processes that are now increasingly being employed in distance education address both aspects of quality. These processes may be of different types: quality assurance, peer review, benchmarking, quality enhancement and quality audits.

Quality Assurance

Quality assurance is concerned with warranting the quality of a product or service some predetermined

standard. In distance education, quality assurance processes are therefore concerned with comparing the quality of a particular offering or set of offerings against this standard. Whereas in manufacturing, quality assurance processes can be carried out with great precision, in distance education the processes are much less precise.

Quality assurance processes often involve the use of checklists to identify the dimensions of quality against which offerings are assessed. The adequacy of quality assurance processes therefore depends on the adequacy of the checklists.

Peer Review

Peer review processes are sometimes used to identify quality concerns during or after the course development. Peer review processes can therefore constitute a subset of quality assurance processes. The purpose of introducing the use of peer review panels is to increase the reliability of assessments of quality. However, Twigg (2001) has pointed out that the lack of preparation of review teams erodes the validity of the assessments made by peer review panels. Twigg has suggested that it would be preferable to employ professional staff who are trained in quality assessment Phipps and Merisotis (2000) also found that Faculty did not regard broad peer review course development as being very important.

A less formal form of course development peer review frequently takes place through the use of teams in course development, which was one of the innovations originally introduced into distance education by the UKOU and later taken up strongly within the field of distance education.

Benchmarking

Benchmarking is a process of comparing one's performance with the performance of similar organizations in a particular field of endeavour (The European Federation of Quality Management, n.d.). Benchmarking has been used widely in industry over a long period and is starting to be applied in higher education generally (McKinnon, Walker and Davis, 2000) but it is only recently that it has been taken up in distance education.

The value of benchmarking lies in selection of the organizations against which to benchmark. This involves not identifying an institution that exhibits

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